

Friday, November 28<sup>th</sup> 2014

## The Great Beauty (15)

dir: Paolo Sorrentino

starring: Toni Servillo, Carlo Verdone,

sponsor: Mr & Mrs Collard (LFS members)

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After filming in the USA and Ireland for his Hollywood movie *'This Must Be The Place'* (2011, with Sean Penn), Paolo Sorrentino has returned to his native Italy for a stupendous great gulp of Italian cinema. *The Great Beauty* makes a thematic trilogy with *The Consequences of Love* (2004) and *Il Divo* (2008), his two best-known films, also starring his regular lead Toni Servillo.

Here, a lugubrious, playful Servillo plays Jep Gambardella, a well-connected *flâneur* and journalist, hosting party after party for the upper echelons of Roman society, and at the same time pining for a lost teenage love. As ever when working with Sorrentino, Servillo embodies a kind of mummified representative of power. In the Oscar-nominated *Il Divo*, he played Italian politician Giulio Andreotti; in *The Consequences of Love* he was a hangdog Mafioso who curiously, by means of a plot device, must avoid real life at all costs, especially real life represented by a woman he might love.

The influences of *The Great Beauty* are worn on its Gucci sleeve – the Fellini of *La dolce vita* (1960) and the Antonioni of *La notte* (1961). Yet this isn't the 1960s bourgeoisie deliquescing into their own emptiness – this is the vaunting pleasure of the modern 'one per cent' revelling in unapologetic wealth. Gambardella is a kind of guide to an underworld, or alternate world – this has a heritage dating back to Dante – and clearly his role is an echo of Marcello Mastroianni in *La dolce vita*. No effort is spared to caress, visually, the statuary and stones and fountains and interiors of Rome, much as Antonioni did, physically, with frail hands, in his final short film.

*The Great Beauty* opens with forgiveable cliché. It's a scene of tourists on a hill overlooking the cityscape of Rome – a Japanese man faints from the sheer beauty of what he is seeing. The film then cuts to Gambardella's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday party at night, pulsating with beautiful people. On his way home he notices a religious school and nuns at work, getting up even as he goes to bed. It's an image of refreshment and youth, in cool cloisters and lush gardens, which he rejects.

Every now and again, we get flashbacks to Gambardella, aged 18, with the girl he truly loved. As he falls asleep he glimpses on the ceiling above his bed the same blue sea that incorporates a primal memory of a day spent together, her looking out as he swims alone in the cerulean water and shouting a warning as a speedboat heedlessly



approaches (he must be thankful it wasn't driven by Alain Delon.) Early in the film, Gambardella meets the husband of his lost love, who brings news of her death, which visibly shakes him. Perhaps, the viewer is tempted to suppose, something is about to give. Having spent 40 years trying to get away from the success of his novel *The Human Apparatus*, is he about to renounce the *Vanity Fair*-style interviewing and return to his naked talent, or was that all he ever had in him?

The ensemble cast are all excellent. The script, when it is allowed to flourish and speak over the exuberant visuals, is also good – there's one bravura scene when the smooth-talking Gambardella does such a perfect take-down of an uppity (female) fellow author that she has to leave the party immediately. The camera swoops, glides and turns upside down, frames are immaculately composed, the lighting is richly realised, the colours and even the shadows exquisite to look at. This is Rome without its poor or its famous dark side: the Vatican looms large at the very end, when a Mother Teresa-type figure makes a surprise intervention into Gambardella's inner self. In a deft bit of satiric characterisation, a cardinal in line for the throne of St. Peter and to boot a famous exorcist, does nothing but discuss recipes.

As a take on the papacy it's a little more playful than something Marco Bellocchio would do in, say, *My Mother's Smile*, (sadly undistributed in the UK) from 2002, but it serves a purpose. A criticism might be that it both celebrates and critiques a spiritually vacant, vacuous existence, both having its *panforte* and eating it, but a not dissimilar thing was said about *La dolce vita* when it first came out. However, the brimful virtuosity on show here, the sheer pleasure in cinema, is hard to argue with, even if you are more inclined to the cinema of Pasolini than Fellini, as this reviewer professes.

**Synopsis:** Rome, present day. A Japanese tourist faints while photographing the cityscape from the Janiculum Hill. We cut to late night at a glamorous 65<sup>th</sup> birthday party; the host is Jep Gambardella, an influential journalist who is voyeurish, detached and amused by the cavortings of his wealthy guests. We learn that 40 years earlier he wrote a brilliant début novel. He is haunted by his past; a lost love who, he discovers, has recently died. There are more parties, visits to restaurants and night-time walks through empty streets. Gambardella weeps at the funeral of his friend's son but this is a rare crack in his sleek carapace. Soon members of the church begin to appear at his social occasions – a cardinal tipped for the papacy, and then a living saint who ends up sleeping on his bedroom floor. Finally there is an intimation that Gambardella may write another book.

### Credits

**Jep Gambardella:** Toni Servillo  
**Romano:** Carlo Verdone  
**Ramona:** Sabrina Ferilli  
**Lello Carva:** Carlo Buccirosso  
**Trumeau:** Iaia Forte  
**Viola:** Pamela Villoresi  
**Stefania:** Galatea Ranzi  
**Conte Colonna:** Franco Graziosi  
**Stefano:** Giorgio Pasotti  
**Affio Bracco:** Massimo Popolizio  
**Contessa Colonna:** Sonia Gessner  
**Ragazza esangue:** Anna Della Rosa  
**Andrea:** Luca Marinelli  
**Lorena:** Serena Grandi  
**Arturo:** Vernon Dobtcheff

**Director:** Paolo Sorrentino  
**Screenplay:** Paolo Sorrentino, Umberto Contarello  
**DoP:** Luca Bigazzi  
**Editor:** Cristiano Travaglioli  
**Music:** Lele Marchitelli  
**Sound:** Emanuele Cecere  
**Costume:** Daniela Ciancio  
**Producers:** Nicola Giuliano, Francesca Cima

Italy/France, 2013. 142 mins

# Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent

## Interview with Toni Servillo

Toni Servillo clutches his cigar throughout the Cannes press conference for his new film. The following day, he still has it, tight between his fingers. Sometimes, it is transferred to the corner of his mouth, gripped between teeth, Groucho-style. Mostly it rests in his hand. Throughout, it remains unlit. He quit five years ago, he explains, when I ask if he is going to go smoke it soon. "This is therapeutic. It helps me resist." I'm amazed. It's not a temptation? He shakes a head flecked with stubble, topped with a puff of white. His face, folded and rubbery as a seal, creases briefly then returns to neutral. He and the translator share a look. The look of those who know what it is to quit smoking.



This superficially louché, but actually slightly strange and repressed little ritual is a rare point of overlap between Servillo and his character in *The Great Beauty*. The movie is a masterpiece, a grand swooning epic, lush to the point of insanity, Fellini turned up to 11. Servillo plays bon vivant socialite Jep Gambardella, a Rome playboy who wrote a fine novel in his youth but has since devoted himself to immaculate indolence. By day he rests and reads a little; by night he comes alive, a vampire in a linen suit, throwing great raves for primped and preened pals in his penthouse. Early in the film, a journalist comes to interview him about his defunct literary career; he berates her for caring (intellectually, Jep is a closet puritan).

Servillo shares the feeling. "That an actor is so often asked their opinion on soccer or cuisine or politics or public transport," he says, via a translator, "is part of the degeneration process in showbusiness. Politicians in Italy seem to spend so much time giving interviews, they don't have time to make the laws."

And what's the effect of such focus on superficiality? "We have lost insight. We don't seem to have the necessary concentration to ponder in-depth, or to set up a dialectic confrontation. We just spend time speaking our opinions and this creates a multiplication effect of confusion and chaos." He sits back and sucks on his cigar.

Servillo is a singular star. As Criss Henderson, director of a Chicago theatre where he recently performed said, he's actually plain confounding. "I'm almost at a loss to describe him. He's extraordinary. He isn't stamping his performance with any movie star quality. He's simple."

In cinema he is best known to English-language audiences as Paolo Sorrentino's muse, the man who has had a lead – and a big hand – in the director's best films. He was the dignified gangster in *The Consequences of Love* (2004), the slippery, cadaverous prime minister in *Il Divo* (released in 2008, the same year he starred as the chilling crime boss in Matteo Garrone's *Gomorrah*). He has a thriving, highbrow theatrical career, co-founded a major company called *Teatri Uniti* in 1987, has worked solidly in all mediums for the past three decades.

Yet the key to this pre-eminent Italian actor of the age has to be his hypnotic unknowability. In *The Great Beauty*, his mask of sardonic disregard is mesmerising. Jep is gentle, kind, attractive, and also a coward who smirks hopelessly, through the Botox, in the face of ageing. (Servillo, 54, plays 65 in the film, and could probably pass for it.)

Italy, he says, is especially concerned with *la bella figura*, in particular "the entrepreneurial class". "They seem very much obsessed with the present. They disregard the past and forget to plan for the future. It is this that triggers this general atmosphere of what I call a moral lack of tone."

Out of character, Servillo's face loses a little of its intrigue. He looks normal, speaks neutrally, whatever the content. I ask at one point why Sorrentino's films are more acclaimed outside Italy, where people can't hope to pick up the nuances (there's a fair bit in this one about the specific disposition of the Neapolitan flâneur). "I don't really care," he says, mild and smiling, and meaning it.

*The Great Beauty* is intentionally overwhelming; its feast of riches borderline nauseating. In an early scene, a Japanese tourist keels over while sightseeing; perhaps with the heat, more likely intoxicated by the visuals. Ultimately, it suggests that only by living in poverty can one hope to survive such a saturated environment.

"I think that beauty can injure you to death," nods Servillo. "It can cause an injury that can never be cured. Or it can so traumatise you, your life changes direction. The beauty of the harmony of nature that is for ever lost, or a daily rite that you perform, or diving into the sea for a swim. Those experiences are going to mark you."

So he is not fearful for the audience's health, sitting there, soaking it up? "No, no, no," he says, cigar drumming the table. "Each single gesture of art must be daring. One must not be concerned with the side-effects."

Catherine Shoard, *The Guardian*

**Our next screening: Friday December 5<sup>th</sup>, 7.30pm**

### **The Innocents (12a)**

Based on the Henry James story "The Turn of the Screw," *The Innocents* is a psychological thriller about a woman who takes a governess job for two orphans in a Victorian home. She begins to see what she believes are ghosts and suspects the children's bizarre behavior is the result of supernatural powers.

This season's classic film (from 1961) is directed by Jack Clayton. Dripping with atmosphere, which is perfectly enhanced by the luminous black and white photography, it is centred on a tremendous performance from Deborah Kerr as Miss Giddens, ably assisted by a cast of regulars from the time, (including Peter Wyngarde, well before he became better known as Jason King.) *The Innocents* is the perfect ghost story for the Christmas season.